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SUBJECT: PRT GARDEZ: REGIONAL MEETING IN SUPPORT OF
CROSS-BORDER JIRGA

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Representatives from the southeastern provinces of Paktia, Khost, Paktika, and Ghazni gathered in Gardez January 25 to meet with representatives from Kabul to discuss and build support for the cross-border Jirgas initiative. The event demonstrated the Government's efforts to secure support from an area critical to the Jirgas' success. The four provincial governors, representatives of the central Government, and local tribal and political leaders spoke to an audience of traditional and official leaders. The speakers praised the Jirgas as a traditional Afghan/Pashtun institution aimed at solving conflict. They also stressed that the Jirgas represented an Afghan attempt to deal with war and addressed the need for Afghanistan to become less reliant on international assistance in the long term. Some speakers used the event to blame Pakistan for inciting the insurgency in order to divide Pashtuns and maintain influence in Afghanistan. The Governor of Paktika warned that Afghanistan could likewise export insurgency to Pakistan if Islamabad did not respond to peaceful approaches. The audience responded enthusiastically to the Pakistan-bashing and patriotic Afghan/Pashtun themes but appeared to take a wait-and-see approach on the effectiveness of the Jirgas. The meeting highlights the challenges facing the jirga planning commissions. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) The Paktia provincial government hosted January 25 a regional meeting to promote President Karzai's proposed cross-border "Peace Jirga" with Pakistan. The event attracted officials and tribal elders from the greater Paktia (Loya Paktia) area that encompasses Paktia, Khost, Ghazni, and Paktika provinces. The governors and members of provincial shuras and tribal elders, local delegates to the Jirgas, some Presidential advisors, political party representatives, regional ANA and ANP leaders, most key Paktia officials and representatives of coalition forces, and the international aid community attended the function.

¶3. (U) The 23 speakers at the half-day event focused on expressing support for the jirga concept as a way to resolving the current war, espousing patriotic themes, and making strenuous denunciations of Pakistan for being responsible for present difficulties. Speakers from Kabul, including representatives of the President's office and ministries, a local member of parliament, and members of the recently-established jirga commission, pointed out that jirgas, a traditional Afghan/Pashtun institution, had been used in the past by Afghan governments to solve disputes. They highlighted that the Karzai initiative showed that the central Government was interested in a peaceful solution to the present conflict with Pakistan. They claimed tribes on both sides of the border would respect decisions by the jirga. The speakers characterized the jirga as being essentially apolitical. The delegates indicted that they would open a regional information office in Gardez to answer questions and concerns about the jirga.

¶4. (U) Several speakers emphasized that Afghanistan needed to develop means to solve its own problems -- that international support would not last forever. They stressed that the inhabitants of the greater Paktia (Southeastern) region needed to overcome their factional tendencies to bring the war to an end. Only regional and tribal unity in dealing with the insurgency could result in an improved security situation. Speakers reminded the audience that suicide is not an Islamic practice and that the only real recent Jihad in Afghanistan had been against the Russia-backed communist regime.

KABUL 00000343 002 OF 002

Pakistan as the Root of the Problem

¶5. (SBU) The local audience expressed support for the jirga proposal, though several provincial and local tribal elders focused on the Pakistani government as the root cause for the insurgency in Afghanistan. They drew upon several familiar themes, including that Pakistan and its Punjabi leadership sought to divide the Pashtuns and maintain a weak Afghanistan subject to Pakistani influence. They noted that no insurgency existed during the Taliban period because Islamabad controlled that Afghan regime. Several speakers alluded to Pakistan's proposal to place fences and mines along the border as a ruse to physically divide the Pashtun tribes in both nations, just as the Durand Line had split them administratively. They asserted that the suicide bombers and so-called jihadists were all trained in Pakistan and noted that the 150 Taliban infiltrators killed recently by coalition forces in Paktika all were Pakistanis. The Governor of Paktika, Akram Khpalwak, a young, well-regarded, and popular leader, indulged in an 45-minute populist rant. Warming to his appreciative local audience, Khpalwak described the jirga as possibly Pakistan's last opportunity to solve disputes peacefully, adding, in ill-conceived remarks, that Afghanistan could respond in kind by exporting terrorism to Pakistan.

Comment

¶6. (SBU) One of a series of events being held across Afghanistan to build support for the jirga initiative, the well-attended gathering in Gardez highlights the complexities involved in the jirga proposal while providing a flavor of the themes that have resonance in the border provinces. The audience of influential tribal and provincial representatives welcomed the meeting -- some because it addressed a mechanism that should be useful for addressing cross-border issues and

others because it provided another platform for criticizing Pakistan. The question among the predominantly Pashtun attendees was not whether to hold the jirga, but how it would be structured, whether it could make binding decisions, and what its outcomes should be. Getting past the neighbor-bashing to a implement a commitment to cross-border cooperation to solve problems is, of course, the challenge faced by the Afghan and Pakistani commissions that have responsibility for implementing the jirga proposal. We continue to press for constructive engagement by the two commissions, underlining U.S. willingness to support a joint plan for the jirgas.

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